Challenging Hegemonic Structures: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Fiction and Film

With Special Reference to

Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

Jan Morris's *Conundrum*

Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry*

Tom Hooper's *The Danish Girl*

A SYNOPSIS

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For if I split the fetters on me,

And for once if I come to thee,

For in my dark closet now you see,

From a stunted cleft the light retreats,

For if you knew that the one you hate,

By lord was lovingly made.

"The world changes with time and with it human behaviour and social law" (87), says mythologist, DevduttPattanaik. Heterosexuality, and Patriarchy form the vertebrae of the community in which we live.The social and cultural moorings bind us from the time that we take birth and form the social structure in which we live and which we accept without question. Gender and sexalthough different terms,play a significant role in this structure. Sex refers to the biological difference while Gender is a social construct.

According to American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler, Gender is performative. She describes it as, "The repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal overtime to produce the appearance of substance,of a natural sort of being" (45). It is the dominating 'Cultural Agent' that creates the base for Heterosexuality/Homosexuality, Masculinity/Femininity.

The conventional view of ideal masculinity is being tough,contentious and competitive while femininity demands that womenbe malleable and benign. Anthropologist Margaret Mead, in her study *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935)concluded that the dissimilarity in the temperament of both men and women was not because of the biological difference;instead it was a result of the social and cultural expectations that the society held for each sex. So, each individual's

Gender Identity[1] chiefly comprised of the culturally defined and accepted behaviours, attributes and traits.

Cultural and literary theories have always played a major role in shaping social structures. The Modern and the Post-Modern perspectives on gender and sexuality have undergone major changes with the advent of Structuralism, Feminism and Queer theories. When he placed culture in binary oppositions, Levi Strauss brought a new dimension into the study of culture and anthropology. Structuralists asserted that there is a free play of signs but within a structure controlled by a centre. This centre gives meaning to the components. Post structuralism defied the basic premise of structuralism when it challenged absolute meanings in a system. The emergence of Post Structuralism is associated with Jacques Derrida's*Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences* (1966). When Derrida opposed the immutability of the transcendental signified or centre, he deconstructed the binaries in which the latter is always subservient to the former[2]. Feminists, sexologists and Queer theorists benefitted a great a deal from this approach which decentred the presence of an intellectual centre.

In the mid twentieth century the clear line between the Male-Female,Heterosexual-Homosexual paradigm began to weaken. The notion that Homosexuals and Transgenders are aberrant broke down. Gender deviants could now assert their identities. Heterosexuality defines people as men or women. The term theorizes that only this form of sexuality is recognized and celebrated in the society while others are deviant. Adrianne Rich, a feminist poet and a writer who in 1976 came out of the closet as a lesbian, in her essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*published in 1980 emphasized that heterosexuality has been imposed upon

[1] Gender identity is an individual's conception of oneself as Female or a Male. The gender identity of a person can be same or can be different than the sex which is assigned at the time of birth. One can be a She and may identify herself to a He and vice versa.

[2]White-Black, Male-Female,Good-Evil, Hero-villain etc.

women and one who fails to comply with these social standards places oneself at the risk of social dismissal and even physical abuse.

Queer Theory emerged in the early 1990s out of the AIDS Crisis[3] which increased the public fear ofthis rapidly sprouting disease. Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, established the under structure for Queer theory. Theterm Queer, according to the thesaurus means something that is "unusual or bizarre" (636). Legend has established that queers have been amongst us since the Classical era. Homer in his epic poem,*Iliad* explicitly elucidates the same sex relation between Achilles, and Patroculus, albeit it does not portray them as lovers considering the time in which the text was framed. Greek mythology also has evidence of a character namely Iphis, who was born a girl but raised as a son by Telethusa. Though the Hindu mythology does not portray homosexuality so clearly but the existence of the Third sex or Intersex[4] and Hermaphrodites[5]is present in our traditional religious narratives. One such example is of Ardhanarishavara, created by the amalgamation of the powers of Lord Shiva, and Goddess Parvati. It is a deity that embodies the characteristics of both the genders. The Greeks, as DevduttPattanaik alludes "socially approved the paedophilic expression of homoeroticism" (3).

Homosexuality in the former days was looked upon as a serious cerebral illness that could be cured through psychotherapeutic method.Homosexuals were considered immoral and were thought of as a threat to the culture and society.In the early twentieth century the term was used to scorn at effeminate men or people reflecting non-

[3] It is a very important event in the history of the LGBTQ community which accelerated the fight for gay rights. In the 1980s United States was the epicentre of AIDS epidemics. The disease was first noticed by the doctors amongst the gay community. The society on the whole was under the notion that it were the homosexual practices that lead to the spreading of the disease popularly called The Gay Cancer or even Gay pneumonia in those days.

[4] Intersex is a term used for people born with the sexual anatomy that does not match with the characteristics defined for a male or a female.

[5] Hermaphrodites were the people who were born with the reproductive organs of both a male and a female.

normative gender characteristics. Individuals with aberrant sexual identities rejected the status of an 'Invert'(Bristow, 21) and in the mid-twentieth century the identity of 'Homophiles'[6]was favoured by them. Then later in the 1960s- 70s they shifted to the 'Gay'identity constituting of Trans and gendernon-conforming people. Gay or Homosexuals were the people who were sexually oriented towards the members of the same sex and it included the term "Lesbian" (Bristow, 23) which was specifically used for women. However, Homosexuality differs from Transgender. Transsexuals are people dealing with Gender Dysphoria i.e. their Gender identity does not match with the sex they are assigned biologically. Therefore they nurture a strong desire for sex reassignment through medical intervention.In the 1980sthe word Queer was freed from its derisive use. It is now used as a phrase for an allied group of people dealing with sexual self-identity crisis (the LGBT- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender).

The Stonewall riot[7] was the first social rebellion movement which aimed at reformation of gay laws. This event is said to have ledto the gay liberation movement thus, triggering the modern fight for the rights of the LGBT community in the United States of America. The foundation for Gay Literature and Research was laid by the Modern Language Association through the Gay Studies Seminar held in 1973. With audacious writers like Bower, Virginia Woolf, and Radclyffe Hall came their thought provoking works. They despised the obsolete approach to gender in the society. These writers thought ahead of their times when it came to the future of gender politics. Woolf along with her contemporaries tenaciously expressed her views in such an era when homosexuality was a criminal offence and a social taboo.

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[6] A term coined by the German astrologist and psychoanalyst Karl-Günther Heimsoth in *Hetero- und Homophillie*(1924).

[7] In June 1969 the Gay community came together for series of violent demonstrations against the police raid at a gay bar named the Stonewall Inn in the Greenwich Village of the New York City.

Queer literature as well as Cinema intended to rehash the cultural approach of the straight ideology. It aimed at challenging these cultural constructions. Published in 1928,*The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall was the first novel in English literature depicting the theme of lesbianism. The novel was printed in the year 1928 as wasVirginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Both novels dealt with lesbianism and bisexuality.Radclyffe Hall who was born on 12 August, 1880, was a 'congenital invert[8].' Hall was at the crest of her career when she decided to write a novel touching on the topic of sexual inversion.

The Unit Of Lamp was her first novel but *The Well Of Loneliness* remains her well acknowledged work hitherto. The novel manifests an undisguised lesbian theme and proved to be controversial.After the British court condemned the novel on grounds of obscenity, *The Well Of Loneliness* was banned from being published. Then the Falcon Press in 1949 came up with an edition that was free of all legal charges and it has been in print ever since. The novel circles around the life of an upper class English woman who in her early years was baptised with a name of a boy considering that her parents expected their first born to be a male. Stephen is described as an invert whose sexual orientation is conspicuous from a very early age. *The Well Of Loneliness* has been known as the best lesbian novel in English literature depicting inversion as a connatural characteristic. The novel ends with a lucid plea by the inverts to its readers, "Give us also the right to our existence!" (Hall, 484).

The first American Gay novel was *Joseph And His Friend: A Story of Pennsylvania* by Bayard Taylor published in 1870. It was followed by many other novels dealing with the similar theme like Oscar Wilde's *The Picture Of Dorian Grey*

[8] Havelock Ellis, a praised poet and author uses the term to describe a woman whose " female garments…usually show some traits of masculine simplicity." (250).

(1890), Edward Prime-Stevenson's *Imre: A Memorandum* (1906), Gore Vidal's *The City And The Pillar* (1948).

Born on August 2, 1982 James Baldwin was this aeon's pre-eminent writer. He added a new dimension to fiction by exploring racial, sexual and social concerns. He was notably avowed for his essays on black portrayal and the black experiences in the United States of America. He had to struggle against the white American majority to make ends meet while dealing with a major identity crisis on account of his being an African American as well as a homosexual. His works illustrate every bit of the struggle that he had to endure. It was during these times that he published his first novel *Go Tell It To The Mountain* in 1953. In 1956 he published his most contentious work *Giovanni's Room* which was distinctly based on a homoerotic theme.In 1999 *Giovanni's Room*was ranked second on the list of the best 100 gay and lesbian novels of the time. Baldwin was completely explicit about his homosexuality and considered that the inflexible patterns of our social structure limited the psychological freedom of a person.

His works *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone*express thethemes of race relations, gender, and sexuality.*Giovanni's Room*, was a bold effort on the part of James Baldwin and despite being cautioned by the publishers he went ahead with the publication of the novel. The novel centresaround the life of a closeted Gay American David, who in order to be consonant and in harmony with the nature's norms suppresses his attraction for an Italian, Giovanni. The narrative boldly discloses the protagonist's mental agony and conflict. He endeavours to fit into the inflexible social structures. Hence, the novel transpires into a tragedy.

In 1965, a meritorious psychiatrist John F Oliver of Columbia coined the term "Transgender" (514) in his reference work*Sexual Hygiene and Pathology*. It was period

of great change when Jan Morris (earlier James Humphrey Morris) chronicled her transition from male to female. *Conundrum* was published in 1974 and it appeared at a time when rapid changes were taking place in the way people thought. Morris opines, "To me gender is not physical at all, but is altogether insubstantial. It is soul, perhaps, it is talent, it is a taste, it is environment, it is how one feels, it is light and shade, it is inner music" (25).

Jan Morris laid the grounds for the "T" of the LGBT community. Through her book, she established the difference between a homosexual and a transgender. *Conundrum* is an impeccable and a splendid read, an equivocal and flat out perception of the mental and societal conflicts that one encounters, being a transgender. Morris has penned down a memoir of her transformation from James Morris, a dexterous man serving the British militant forces to Jan Morris, an identity she secretly associated herself with since childhood. After the sex reassignment surgery (SRS) she fought against all odds to become one of the most refined travel writers of Britain. *Conundrum* is said to be one of the primeval texts to have expressed the experience with great candour and equity.

Jan Morris was born on 2 October, 1926 and presently resides in the North of Wales. For a Welsh Transgender it is certainly a great accomplishment to have expressed boldlysomething that was tabooed.

Classical Hollywood cinema treated gender and sexuality in a manner that was stereotypical; Cinema in fact reinforced the normative view. In mainstream cinema the hero is brave, violent and powerful while the female is subservient. If romantic then the film would depict love between a man and a woman. Homosexuals were depicted as Drag Queens[9] and lesbians as abnormal. However after the mid twentieth century, film

[9] These were the males who dressed up and acted extravagantly as females.

makers tried to go beyond the fixed ideologies regarding gender and sexuality. These film makers came to be associated with "New Queer Cinema", a term formulated in 1992 by B.Ruby Rich[10].

The Queer cinemamade an attempt to confront and defy the presumptions of the society regarding sex, gender and identity. The Dickson experimental sound film *The Gay Brothers* (1985) by William Kennedy Dickson was the first ever motion picture that articulated a noteworthy cast of homosexuality.Ang lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, became a touchstone in the modern queer cinema. It was the first major motion film to have displayed a love romance between two lead homosexual characters.

Hollywood's first attempt to depict the gender identity crisis was *Boys Don't Cry* (1970), directed by Kimberly Pierce, It was inspired by the real life story of Brandon Teena, a Transgender who was brutally murdered in 1993. The script of the movie was co-written by Kimberly Pierce and Andy Bienen. The film is an exemplary piece of art and won multiple award nominations at the Academy Awards. The plot centresaround the life of an American transgender. The movie presents the heart clenching story of Brandon Teena, his unbroken struggle in finding love, acceptance and above all himself. But he falls a victim to a heinous crime and is murdered by two of his male companions. The film is based on the famous book by Aphrodite Jones, *All she wanted*(1996). It highlights the theme of the struggles of a transgender to survive in society with its rigid gender roles.

Directed by Tom Hooper, *The Danish Girl* (2015) is a British American biography of a Danish painter Lil Elbe. It is modelled on David Ebershoff's novel with a similar name. Lil is said to have been a trans female and according to some sources she was also the first one to willingly withstand a sex reassignment surgery. The cast of

[10] B. Ruby Rich is an American scholar and a professor for Film and Digital Media and Social documentation at the University Of California, Santa Cruz. She is also a critic of queer and feminist films and is currently based in San Francisco.

the movie includes Eddie Redmayne as Elbe and Alice Vikander as Greta. Conducted with utmost subtlety, the film unravels in the Copenhagen of 1925. On account of handling such a prohibitive subject with great finesse, the film received muchappreciation and optimistic reviews from critics.

Both the films *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Danish Girl*sensitively and realistically portray the agony and ecstasy of gender transformation.

Gender and Sexuality are closely linked with the issue of identity. Today Gender Studies seek to include deviant groups who have for now either been overlooked or understudied. A holistic approach is needed to explore and understand gender minorities. The human experience is vast and varied and cannot be restricted by labels and roles. Albeit studies on the selected texts have been made over the years, this study is an attempt to compare and trace the changing perspectives of the society on gender and sexuality and how they have been influenced by modern theories like Feminist, Gender and Queer. A comparison between the selected novels as well the difference of perspective in fiction and film it is hoped, will yield interesting results.

The objectives of the study therefore are:

1. to examine the changing notion of gender andsexuality in the twentieth and early twenty first century.
2. to study the treatment of homosexuality and lesbianism in selected novels and films.
3. to analyse the characters of the protagonists from the psychological perspective.
4. to make a comparative study of the representations of gender and sexuality in the selected novels and films.

5. to make a stylistic analysis of the selected novels and films focussing on narrative and film techniques with reference to the topic taken.

The tentative chapter division is as follows:

1. Gender, Sexuality and the Queer Culture: A theoretical Perspective.
2. The Existence Enigma: Homosexuality and Lesbianism in the selected works of James Baldwin and Radclyffe Hall
3. The Quest for Identity in Jan Morris's *Conundrum*
4. The Role of Cinema: Mainstreaming the minorities in *Boys don't Cry* and *The Danish Girl*
5. The Labyrinth of Queerness: Fiction and Film
6. Conclusion

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The Danish Girl. Dir. Tom Hooper. Screenplay: Lucinda Coxon. Perf. Eddie Redmayne, and Alicia Vikander. Working Title, 2015.

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